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**Eliminating Poor Performers:**

The catalyst to improve quality in the U.S. Army

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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## **Executive Summary**

**Title:** Eliminating Poor Performers: The catalyst to improve quality in the U.S. Army

**Author:** MAJOR Clifton T. Causey, United States Army

**Thesis:** Applying command influence on quality control of personnel by encouraging leaders to eliminate poor performers will improve the overall quality of the U.S. Army.

**Discussion:** Getting and keeping the right people in the Army should be the most important priority at all levels of command and should be reflected in all aspects of Army culture. This does not suggest that quality must trump quantity at all costs. It is naïve to think that the size of the Army would be purely dictated by the number of quality personnel available. There are cultural trends that hinder this idea from maintaining traction and driving decisions at all levels. This paper proposes two major changes in culture. First, encourage leaders to separate poor performers from the Army. Second, accept that units will likely maintain manning closer to minimum requirements, at least initially. These proposed changes are derived from analyzing recurring issues with Army personnel management, and by comparing Army personnel management ideology with top performing businesses and U.S. Special Operations Forces ideology.

**Conclusion:** The current culture of the Army says that people are the most important priority, but its actions are contrary to keeping quality people in the Army. Disillusioned soldiers are leaving due to a lack of job satisfaction. The examination of successful business practices and SOF practices suggests that rigorous personnel management to get and keep the right people in the organization is the most important aspect of maintaining a great company or unit. The Army can apply this by facilitating and encouraging separation of poor performers from the Army. This will initially increase quality of units and will eventually improve job satisfaction by increasing the quality of leaders. Changing the parameters of success to be more qualitative by allowing unit commanders to decrease to an acceptable size will permit the flexibility required begin this change. By managing expectations, commanders will resist growth at the expense of quality therefore creating a consistent pattern of increased quality.

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# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Background.....	3
The problems.....	4
Improving the 90% solution.....	7
Why change now? .....	8
Possible Solutions.....	8
A civilian perspective.....	9
A SOF perspective.....	10
Applying possible solutions .....	12
Logical Constraints.....	13
Leadership.....	14
Retention.....	16
Recruiting.....	17
Application and Expected Results.....	17
Possible Critiques.....	19
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	20
Citations.....	22
Bibliography.....	25

## INTRODUCTION – Less can be more?

Two infantry squads enter a competition that tests their ability to conduct mission essential tasks. These two squads are identical in all aspects except one. 1<sup>st</sup> Squad is manned at 100% (11 personnel) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad is manned at 81% (9 personnel). Notwithstanding the difference in the amount of personnel, the squads have identical weapons, quality of training, and experience among its members. The outcome of this competition reveals that 1st Squad was slightly more efficient at very simple physical tasks, such as moving a large obstacle that required the entire squad's strength. However, 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad was far more efficient overall because they succeeded at every task that required teamwork and anything more difficult than achieving the basic standards. Why would a smaller unit perform at a higher level?

Several weeks earlier, these squads were completely identical. They both had two squad members who were poor performers and were dragging down the overall performance of the squad. The 2<sup>nd</sup> squad leader removed them from the squad because they were requiring too much of his time. After training for several weeks without these poor performers, his squad, although smaller, became a much better team and each individual began operating at a higher level. 1<sup>st</sup> Squad kept their poor performers, spending time and resources trying to bring them up to standard. They finally achieved minimum standards, but compromised the full potential of the other members of the squad.

### THE PROBLEM

The culture of the United States Army is not as effective as it could be with regard to personnel management. The current process for personnel management is plagued by a culture that drives leaders to retain all personnel, even poor performers.

This hypothetical scenario uses a simple situation to demonstrate a problem. The culture of the United States Army is not as effective as it could be with regard to personnel management.

The current process for personnel management is plagued by a culture that drives leaders to retain all personnel, even poor performers. 1<sup>st</sup> Squad represents the status quo. The unintended consequence of this culture is a loss of potential quality. Three simple examples help to describe the problem as a cycle which was deduced from a synthesis of research involving Army personnel management studies, successful civilian personnel management ideologies, and a case study of Special Operations Forces (SOF) ideology. First, a leader, given the responsibility to order men into harm's way, is given very little authority to fire his poor performing subordinates. Second, many soldiers experience poor job satisfaction partially due to working with and for poor performers and often separate at their first opportunity. Finally, these separations increase demands on recruiting, creating pressures to accept a lower standard of recruit, therefore increasing the number of poor performers. The cycle continues.

The principal point of this paper is that getting and keeping the right people in the Army, and establishing a culture that supports this standard, should be the most important priority at all

#### **THESIS**

Applying command influence on quality control of personnel by encouraging leaders to eliminate poor performers will improve the overall quality of the U.S. Army.

levels of command. It does not suggest that quality must trump quantity at all costs. It is naïve to think that the size of the Army could be based purely on the number of quality personnel available. However, in a period of decreasing budgets and forecasted reduction

in troop strength, the Army must focus on maximizing the value of its people.

The idea that people are the most valuable asset is certainly not new to the Army. Recently, Chief of Staff of the Army, General Odierno wrote, "The strength of our Nation is our Army; the strength of our Army is our Soldiers..."<sup>1</sup> There are cultural trends that hinder this idea from maintaining traction and driving decisions at all levels. This paper proposes two major



changes in culture. First, encourage leaders to separate poor performers from the Army. Second, accept that units will likely maintain manning closer to minimum requirements, at least initially. The rationale for these changes is derived from analyzing recurring issues with Army personnel management, and by comparing Army personnel management ideology with top performing businesses and U.S. Special Operations Forces ideology.

It is necessary to define a few terms in order to provide context for the arguments that follow. “Culture” is defined as the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social group.<sup>2</sup> For example, the idea that commissioned and non-commissioned officers should always strive to lead from the front and to be willing to do the things they ask of their subordinates is a characteristic of Army culture. The term “poor performer” describes a soldier who consistently demonstrates a trend of not meeting the minimum standard of performance for his/her job. Unless otherwise defined, the “minimum standard” or “minimum requirement” is referring to a standard or requirement defined by the Army. For example, the minimum required infantry privates in a company is 70% of the total allotted. This 70% represents the minimum requirement for this company to complete its mission essential tasks.

## **BACKGROUND**

Several studies identify problems with the Army personnel management system.<sup>3</sup> The study topics range from recruiting to promotion policies. These problems are very complex, often change due to uncontrollable variables, and are a product of Army culture that is centered on a system of checks and balances to maintain high quality personnel. This system is based on the premise that each soldier is assessed against a common standard based on the needs of the Army. One example of this system is the Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF) which

contains evaluations of performance and levels of training and experience. The Army uses the information in OMPF to assess the quality of an individual and compare it to an established prototype to determine promotion or retention potential. This system is effective at the macro-organizational level, but there are problems with leadership, culture, retention, and recruiting that should be addressed. A look at the current environment reveals a great opportunity to introduce change.

## **WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS?**

**Leadership Culture.** The work environment soldiers experience during their first term of service has a huge impact on retention. The United States Army does a good job of training, equipping, and leading soldiers. Nonetheless, there are soldiers who become poor performers. One study, which is described in greater detail later, demonstrates the tremendous impact these poor performers can have on an organization.<sup>4</sup> Leaders are taught that poor performers are a result of poor leadership and, since the Army can't afford to lose personnel, leaders subsequently spend a great deal of time and effort rehabilitating these soldiers. Even when a leader determines that a soldier will not meet the minimum standards and should be separated from the Army, it takes a great deal of time and effort to do so. The impact of this culture is a cycle of behavior that results in two negative effects on a unit. First, soldiers that meet or exceed the standard do not receive a proportionate amount of time and energy from leaders. Second, these soldiers are discouraged because the leader allows a lower standard to exist. This cycle reduces the quality of the work environment, decreases job satisfaction and limits the potential quality of the unit.<sup>5</sup>

## **Retention.**

For years, Congress required the Army to promote only 70 to 80 percent of eligible officers. Under that law, the rank of major served as a useful funnel by which the Army separated out the bottom quarter of the senior officer corps. On September 14, 2001, President Bush suspended that requirement. Today, more than 98 percent of eligible captains are promoted to major.<sup>6</sup>

This quote from Andrew Tilghman's article, *The Army's Other Crisis*, explains the basic problem with Army retention programs. The Army places too much emphasis on quantity at the risk of quality. Retention problems are caused by several issues that change based on the environment in which the Army is required to operate. The decrease in retention that occurred in 2004-2005 caused the Army to take a close look at issues that were causing soldiers to leave the Army. These studies provide the three most common reasons why soldiers leave the Army: Quality of Life, Amount of Pay, and Job Satisfaction.<sup>7</sup>

Although interesting, the studies failed to provide any revolutionary insight into why soldiers were leaving. On the contrary, these results represent issues common among all kinds of employees, both civilian and military. While the Army does a good job accounting for two of these problems, retention programs are not able to effectively address the component of job satisfaction. The Army incorporated several benefit packages during the last decade in response to the above-mentioned issues and these changes enabled the Army to meet or exceed retention goals for the last 3 years.<sup>8</sup> The Army continues to offer good retention incentives to keep soldiers on active duty; however the one thing that could make a good Army retention program even better is to increase job satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> In this area, a shift in personnel management culture can have a significant effect.

The study above identified the following criteria for job satisfaction:<sup>10</sup>

- Amount of enjoyment from my job
- Quality of leadership at place of duty
- Level of job fulfillment and challenge
- Amount of personnel available to do the work

These criteria provide insight into the key issue of how to retain quality soldiers which will be discussed later with a comparison of successful personnel management models.

**Recruiting.** The only way to get the right people in the Army is by having enough flexibility to maintain high standards for recruiting. The Army does a good job actively seeking the highest quality recruit they can afford, but the impact of supply and demand on the human quality market can require a significant deviation from established standards. To simplify a very complex environment, supply of potential recruits is based on the status of the economy and demand is based on U.S. defense strategy. This strategy is greatly influenced by expectations of Army senior leaders to be able to maintain or grow the size of our Army within a given amount of time. For example, when the economy is great and the demand for recruits increases due to defense requirements, it is very difficult to obtain the required amount of recruits without changing quality standards. An understanding of this process allows senior leaders in the Army to manage expectations and ultimately influence defense strategy.

Expectation management sets realistic constraints on personnel management policy. For example, if strategy dictates that the Army must increase to size X by time Y, this growth will be tempered by the expectation of the Army to maintain a certain level of quality. This was apparent when recruiting began to suffer from the stress of the war on terror in 2005. Demand increased

as a direct result of the decrease in retention. The Army struggled to meet its quota for ‘high quality’ recruits<sup>11</sup> - those recruits who are more likely to successfully complete training and finish their first term of enlistment – which has a direct economic cost. For example, the Army loses the majority of every dollar invested for recruiting and training when a soldier fails to complete his first term of enlistment. However, the less tangible effects of a lower quality recruit are manifested in a decreased retention rate, a decrease in quality of the force, and an increase on the demand of recruiting programs. However, if expectations were based on the approach that maintaining the quota of high quality recruits was more important than simply meeting increased in recruiting requirements, it would drive personnel management policy to accept limited growth and a decrease in size of the force.

## **IMPROVING THE 90% SOLUTION**

Personnel management of an organization with the size and dynamic requirements of the U.S. Army is incredibly difficult. One can only strive to reach the best possible solution, knowing that there is unlikely to be a perfect solution. With that said the Army does a good job managing personnel and enjoys continued success by meeting and exceeding its recruiting and retention goals during a difficult period in the history of the Army.<sup>12</sup> However, this paper seeks to focus on quality over quantity. The problems listed below describe how we can take a 90% solution in the greatest standing Army in the world and improve it.

The culture of personnel management is best described as a cycle. By analyzing leadership culture, retention problems, and recruiting standards, it is possible to deduce the following problems with Army personnel management culture. The following problems prohibit the Army from maintaining the highest quality soldiers available.

1. Leaders do not seek to separate poor performers from the Army
2. Retention suffers from poor job satisfaction
3. Recruiting and Retention programs are focused on quantity over quality

## **WHY CHANGE NOW?**

The U.S. has always sought to improve the quality of its Army. The transformation to an all volunteer force is a key example. There are three reasons why the U.S. Army should take advantage of the current opportunity to transform its fighting force. First, a reduction in force can rapidly facilitate separation of poor performing soldiers. History demonstrates that the U.S. reduces its armed forces at the conclusion of extended conflict and this correlates with recent priorities published by the DoD.<sup>13</sup> Second, increasing recruiting standards is more feasible in a poor economy. With fewer jobs in the civilian sector, the recruiting market share increases, allowing the Army to raise the bar and still meet recruiting requirements.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the Army will educate and evolve during this period of reduction. Senior military leaders will likely follow historical trends of increasing efficiency during a time of peace and a shortage of funding. The Army has an opportunity to change its culture and improve the quality of its people in ways which can result in a better fighting force.

## **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

The problems described above are not new and there are no single solutions. However, there are other organizations that deal with similar issues to retain quality personnel. By examining organizations that excel in their market and apply effective personnel management policies, it is possible to suggest solutions to improve Army policies.

## A CIVILIAN PERSPECTIVE

Why use a civilian business model to compare with military personnel management practices? Many authors write books describing how to build and maintain a successful business because our capitalist society is focused on increasing productivity from its employees. It would be foolish to disregard examination of the intellectual energy put forth toward these ideas in the civilian sector because they are not specifically developed for application in the military, particularly considering that there are many similarities between the military and any other large institutions. On that premise, the study of successful businesses offers a wealth of information about organizational dynamics and leadership that may be applicable to the military. The most attractive reason for studying business models is the abundance of studies producing quantitative data that may be used as measures of success.<sup>15</sup>

One such study, which was conducted over the course of three years, compared 11 companies that met the requirements of a “great” Fortune 500 company. The requirements for this distinction included a notable transition from normal returns to a sustained improvement defined by at least three times the market average for at least 15 years.<sup>16</sup> Another study focused on trends of the top Fortune 500 companies and found that 8 of the top 10 were also listed in the top 100 best companies to work for in America.<sup>17</sup> One major characteristic of these companies was high level of job satisfaction among employees. The accomplishments of these companies were truly significant and the study revealed several commonalities that may be applicable to the Army personnel management problems discussed above. Many, if not all, of the results of these studies are already addressed by Army culture or policy. But a few of these ideas support an argument that the Army can do better. They are:

- 1. Get the right people**
- 2. Maintain rigorous personnel management standards**
- 3. Require great leaders**

**Get the right people.** A trend of great companies is to spend 10 times the effort on starting with the right people than anything else.<sup>18</sup> The idea that compels business toward this model is that if you have the right type of people in the organization, they will figure out how to be successful.

**Maintain rigorous personnel management standards.** Creating an environment that has high standards, challenges employees, and weeds out poor performers will increase productivity and will develop and retain quality workers.<sup>19</sup>

**Require great leaders.** The essence of an organization begins and ends with its leadership. The impact of smart and effective leaders is multiplied when they make decisions based on what is best for the organization rather than what is best for them. Their ability to define personnel management standards and practices begins a cycle of increased quality of the organization.<sup>20</sup>

## **A SOF PERSPECTIVE**

The Special Operations Force (SOF) personnel management model provides a successful military case to contrast with the conventional Army model and is more similar in nature than a civilian business model. The history of SOF in the United States is long and prestigious.<sup>21</sup> The adaptation of institutionalized SOF over the last 40 years reflects an effort for the Department of Defense to develop a capability that enjoys continued success against the threats of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> While doing so, the culture of SOF has become more public. This glasnost-like process allowed for an unclassified discussion of some of the organizational dynamics of SOF



units. Also, considering that many traditional SOF missions are now shared with conventional forces due to the last decade of fighting irregular warfare, the two organizations now share a very similar burden of responsibility. Therefore, SOF offers a personnel management model that is more appropriate for comparison than a strictly civilian model.

Army Special Operations (ARSOF) Field Manual 3-05, *Army Special Operations Forces Unconventional Warfare*, states that Special Forces (SF) capability is based on the quality of the SF soldier,<sup>23</sup> and outlines some of the basic characteristics of SOF personnel that are a product of careful selection and extensive training. SOF personnel are adaptable, mature, innovative, culturally aware, self-assured, and self-reliant. These characteristics define the strong foundation required of SOF personnel to conduct the difficult tasks they are charged with accomplishing in very unstable environments.<sup>24</sup> The personnel management culture that supports the selection and training of these soldiers is defined by the following SOF Truths:<sup>25</sup>

- 1. Humans are more important than Hardware.**
- 2. Quality is better than Quantity.**
- 3. Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced.**
- 4. Competent SOF units cannot be created after emergencies occur.**

**Humans are more important than Hardware.** The right people will accomplish the mission with the equipment they have available. The implication in this statement is broader than prioritizing funding or training. It is the idea that a group of the right people will always be more successful no matter what conditions they face. Whereas, despite favorable conditions a group of the wrong people may never accomplish a task.

**Quality is better than quantity.** Smaller and better organizations are always preferable to more people when those people are not up to the task. This principle is operationalized in SOF through the use of high quality personnel operating in small teams to conduct high-risk strategic missions. The personnel are selected based on a higher standard and are trained to a higher standard. Unfortunately, this principle is not directly applicable to the conventional Army. However, the ideology, accepting some risk due to a lack of quantity to maintain a higher level of quality, is applicable.

**Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced.** It takes years to man and train operational units to the level of proficiency needed to accomplish SOF missions. The mass production of this capability assumes that the human quality market can bear the requirement. If not, standards for selection will decrease and the overall quality of SOF will decrease with them.

**Competent SOF units cannot be created after emergencies occur.** The ultimate quality of the organization is at constant risk of degradation by rushing the process of assessment, selection, and training. The investment in SOF personnel requires time.

These truths define a culture that drives leaders to make decisions at all levels to maintain a laser like focus on quality over quantity. This focus reveals a common trend between SOF and successful business models. Getting and keeping the right people is the most important goal for the organization.

## **APPLICATION OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

The approaches described above may seem applicable to most organizations. However, there are numerous challenges to face when applying these solutions in the Army. Increasing job

satisfaction and managing expectations with regards to manning, retention, and recruiting cannot come at the risk of lowering the minimum manning required to protect our nation.

## **LOGICAL CONSTRAINTS**

The examination of successful personnel management cultures above offers some insight into how the Army might try to change, but there are some constraints to the Army personnel management system that cannot be ignored. The U.S. Army is an organization whose personnel management requirements are dictated by strategy and budget. Therefore, the Army has little flexibility to shrink or grow in size of its own accord. As discussed earlier, there are quantitative metrics for unit readiness that are measured on a scale of acceptability. Personnel manning is one of these metrics and it has a defined range that supports mission requirements. For example, if a unit is manned at 100%, it is considered fully mission capable with regards to personnel. However, if that unit were manned at 80%, it might be considered non-mission capable.<sup>26</sup> This measurement of unit readiness is purely quantitative. It does not account for quality of the individuals within that unit, only that a soldier is assigned to the unit with the appropriate MOS and rank. In contrast, there are subjective measurements of unit readiness which allow commanders to qualify their unit's capabilities through the assessment of performance during exercises, but they do not have a significant impact on the personnel management culture.

One approach to change personnel management culture is to allow commanders more flexibility with regard to unit manning assessments, while stressing the importance of eliminating poor performing soldiers. For example, under the current system of measuring unit readiness, a typical battalion commander may not be able to focus on separating poor performers because of a concern for maintaining the highest possible manning level. A change in culture would not enforce strict adherence to maximum manning requirements, but instead would allow

commanders to separate poor performing soldiers until they reached the minimum required limit to accomplish mission essential tasks.

With this in mind, there are some options that could be applied to facilitate some cultural change without a radical overhaul of the system:

- Encourage commanders to separate poor performing soldiers from the Army
- Accept that subordinate leaders may need to stay near the minimum manning requirement or at least fluctuate near these limits
- Manage expectations of growth based on maintaining a higher level of focus on quality

## **LEADERSHIP**

U.S. Army officers and non-commissioned officers are strong leaders by many accounts. Civilian industries often recruit junior and mid-level leaders from the military and countries from around the globe endeavor to send their leaders to U.S. military leadership schools. It is ironic therefore, that Army culture discourages leaders from “weeding out” poor performers, particularly considering that counterparts in the civilian and SOF communities are encouraged to do this. Therefore, a change in leadership culture above and beyond the scope of influence of mid-level and junior leaders is required. The current culture does not facilitate leaders purging poor performers from the Army and is focused on “weeding out” a poor performer through a system of evaluation reports that facilitate or inhibit promotion. This may be effective at the macro level for quantitative personnel manning, but renders leaders ineffective at the micro level with respect to qualitative personnel management.

The current culture begins with formalized leadership training and is normalized as leaders are mentored or personally lead poor performing subordinates. Leaders are taught that poor performance is caused by poor leadership, which unintentionally creates an environment that never gives up on poor performers. There are great benefits from fostering this type of environment, but the unintended consequence may have a negative impact on the potential quality of the unit by decreasing job satisfaction and limiting leadership involvement with the majority. A positive change in leadership culture would be to encourage leaders at all levels to purge poor performers from units within the parameters set by higher commands.

These parameters are another potential flaw in the current personnel management culture. If a unit falls below the optimal level for manning, commanders are responsible for explaining why, and the implication of this responsibility drives commanders to maintain the highest level of manning possible because to do otherwise may be interpreted as failure. While this does not necessarily have a negative impact on the unit, it drives a culture that rarely removes personnel simply for not meeting the job standard. Encouraging commanders to purge poor performing soldiers with the acceptance that their units may gravitate toward the minimum manning requirements could change this culture. This would support the cultural change required to empower leaders and improve job satisfaction for the majority of soldiers.

The current personnel management policies allow leaders to separate poor performers from the military. The challenge is to effect a change in cultural inhibitions through command influence. By changing the criteria for success and changing the focus toward quality at the risk of quantity, commanders will begin to change the culture at all levels. One recommendation would be for Army senior leaders to issue command guidance to subordinate commands to implement this cultural change at all levels of command.

## RETENTION

The objective should not be merely to retain all officers, but to retain talented officers while simultaneously culling out those lacking the distributions of skills, knowledge and behaviors in demand across the force... Retaining sufficient rather than optimally performing officers may have dire consequences for the Army's future. New officer cohorts of high potential talent may be driven away by the prospects of serving under lackluster leadership.<sup>27</sup>

This quote from Peter Buxbaum's article, *From Brain Drain to Internal Bleeding: Retention Problems in the -US Military*, is another great example of the basic problem within the Army retention program. Its focus is quantitative and its methods therefore lack the ability to identify and retain the highest quality personnel. A cultural shift toward quality over quantity is required to fix this problem. Changing the leadership culture will have a tremendous effect on retention because more quality soldiers will want to stay in due to an increase in job satisfaction. This will allow retention programs the flexibility to raise standards for retention and focus their limited funding toward a smaller, more select group of quality soldiers.

The adaptability of the current Army retention program proves sufficient to support this change. Commanders would need to encourage retention programs to retain only the highest quality soldiers with the expectation that these programs would gravitate toward the minimum requirements. One method would be to change the focus of research for development of retention programs toward quality over quantity. Current retention programs are focused on meeting the needs and concerns of the majority instead of meeting the concerns of quality soldiers that are getting out.

## **RECRUITING**

The effect of this cultural shift will likely impact recruiting the least, but the proposed change in Army culture is also applicable in this stage of the personnel cycle. Up to one-third of first term recruits will not finish their first term or will not reenlist.<sup>28</sup> This results in a poor return on investment and keeps recruiting requirements high. Increased retention of first term soldiers will have a significant impact on recruiting requirements and will allow some flexibility for raising recruiting standards.

Current Army recruiting policies are sufficient to support the fluctuations of supply and demand. Army personnel management standards constantly change to facilitate recruitment of the highest quality soldiers based on a fluctuating requirement. A recommendation for change is to maintain a focus on quality at the risk of quantity. Recruiting commanders would need to encourage recruiters to select the highest quality recruits with the expectation that results would gravitate toward the minimum requirements. For example, if a recruiting station increased its quality standard, it would decrease the number of recruits that do not complete their first term enlistment. This would impact the personnel management system in two ways. First, these recruits raise the overall quality of the Army due to their individual quality. Second, over time these recruits will produce a trend of higher first-term retention. This will ultimately decrease long-term recruiting requirements.

## **APPLICATION AND EXPECTED RESULTS**

Applying the recommendations listed above, in the context of the cycle of change, offers insight into some of the expected results. There is inherent initial risk involved in applying this cultural change. Allowing commanders to reduce unit manning to the minimum acceptable

level, while decreasing retention and recruiting outputs, is not necessarily a good idea because, if done improperly, it could potentially weaken the force beyond an acceptable limit. The change would need to be phased. The initial change in operational units will impact recruiting and retention programs and will likely, with time, begin to change the culture of these programs through indirect influence. The real change in this cycle starts with an increase in soldier job satisfaction by focusing on “weeding out” poor performers. This action generates the following cycle which will continue to increase the quality of soldiers:

1. Empowering leaders to “weed out” poor performing soldiers will increase job satisfaction of the majority and increase overall quality of Army units
2. Increased job satisfaction will result in more quality soldiers staying in the Army
3. Lower retention requirements will allow flexibility in the program to raise standards and focus limited funding on a smaller, more select group of quality soldiers
4. Increased retention of first term soldiers will lower the recruiting requirement allowing recruiting standards to increase
5. This evolution will result in higher quality, experienced leaders, which will continue to improve management of units therefore increasing job satisfaction

Like the SOF model, these changes will require time to take effect. The process for this change needs to be well planned and executed and will likely experience difficulties.

Fortunately, current Army policies and philosophy already provide a 90% solution and the mandated reduction in force coupled with a poor economy establishes the good conditions for implementing these changes now. There is no end result to this cycle, but the long term effects can yield far reaching positive effects. The quality of leaders at all levels of the Army will continue to improve, therefore keeping the cycle in a healthy state of being. The quality of the units these leaders command will continually improve.



## POSSIBLE CRITIQUES

The simple logic that Army leaders should be able to fire poor performing soldiers is convincing. But there are legitimate concerns with changing a culture that is mostly successful. The following critiques are expected and reasonable rebuttals are provided.

**Empowering junior leaders with the ability to terminate the military career of subordinates will lead to unfair firings?** Current policies are fair and require substantial evidence to support action. The level of authority for separating a soldier from the Army is established based on rank and grade of the soldier in question. The recommendations above are focused on a change in culture not policy. Commander's influence would empower junior leaders to seek separation of poor performing soldiers, but current policies would sustain a just and reasonable system for doing so.

**If the processes are already in place to "weed out" poor performing soldiers, why is a change required?** The current system is effective, but not optimal. Allowing a poor performing soldier to languish in a unit until he is not eligible for promotion or reenlistment takes the authority and power away from leaders while decreasing the potential quality of their units.

**SOF units can afford to remain small. Reducing the Army to its minimum manning requirements will hollow out the force.** The recent and continued success of SOF resulted in constant stress to grow. USSOCOM's understanding of the impact of growing SOF too quickly or mass producing SOF units caused it to resist rapid growth. The Army at large will never be able to recruit and train at the same level as SOF, but by changing the culture to acknowledge the importance of recruiting and retention of high quality people, the Army can increase its

effectiveness. In order to do this, it must be willing to initially get smaller and then fluctuate in size based on environmental conditions. If minimum standards for manning are realistic, meaning that a unit may still accomplish its mission essential tasks, the unit will not be hollow.

**As a ‘trusted agent’ for America’s youth, isn’t it the Army’s responsibility to train and mold soldiers to be able to accomplish the required standards?** Current Army culture defines the phenomenon of poor performing soldiers as a leadership problem. Leaders are charged with a great responsibility to train, mentor, and provide corrective training to encourage a high level of performance. This should not be mistaken as failure when a specific soldier demonstrates a trend of poor performance. On the contrary, a leader should be charged with upholding the standard at all costs. Therefore, a poor performing soldier should be separated from the Army when that leader deems it is best for the overall welfare of the unit. The macro level personnel management system will separate these soldiers eventually, but by empowering and charging leaders to separate poor performers, they will be able to increase overall quality of their unit.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is a problem. Research shows that quality soldiers are getting out of the Army and that high quality recruits are difficult to consistently obtain. The current culture of the Army says that people are the most important priority, but its actions are contrary to keeping quality people in the Army. Disillusioned soldiers are leaving due to a lack of job satisfaction. The examination of SOF ideology suggests that rigorous personnel management to get and keep the right people in the organization is the most important aspect of maintaining a great unit.

There are solutions. Facilitating and encouraging separation of poor performers from the Army will initially increase quality of units and will eventually improve job satisfaction by increasing the quality of leaders. Changing the parameters of success to be more qualitative by allowing unit commanders to decrease to an acceptable size will permit the flexibility required to begin the change. By managing expectations, commanders will resist growth at the expense of quality therefore creating a consistent pattern of increased quality.

Now is the time to take action. A poor economy and a significant decrease in the Department of the Army budget will create an increase of high quality recruits and soldiers that want and need to be in the Army. These conditions will minimize the impact of “weeding out” poor performers and will allow this cultural shift to occur in the Army before it is required to increase in size again.

In summary, the impact of the following recommendations should be researched further and if found satisfactory, immediately implemented:

- Issue Command Guidance from Army Senior Leadership to begin a focus on the separation of poor performing soldiers.
- Change valuation of manning metrics to reflect a cultural change allowing commanders to gravitate toward minimum manning requirements if necessary
- Change junior officer and non-commissioned officer training to reflect the expectation of leaders to separate poor performing soldiers

The complex nature of Army personnel management creates an environment where there are a myriad of second and third order effects from a single change. This fact makes the above recommendations tentative until further research is accomplished. The hypothesis offered is sound, but the details of implementation require further examination.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond T. Odierno, "Initial Thoughts – Chief of Staff, U.S. Army," (September 7, 2011) Email message to author.

<sup>2</sup> culture. Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/culture> (accessed: January 12, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Government ordered several studies with regards to defense personnel management during and after all major conflicts. These studies cover a wide range of topics and identify numerous problems.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Catlette and Richard Hadden. *Contented Cows Give Better Milk: The Plain Truth about Employee Relations and Your Bottom Line*. (Germantown, TN: Saltillo, 1998), 150.

<sup>5</sup> Catlette, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Tilghman. "The Army's Other Crisis." *The Washington Monthly*. December 2007. <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2007/0712.tilghman.html> (accessed: January 12, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Beerman. "Increasing Army Retention through Incentives". (Research Project, U.S. Army War College, 2006), <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA448815>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), *DOD Announces Recruiting and Retention Numbers for Fiscal Year 2012*. December 19, 2011. <http://www.defense.gov/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=14973>. (accessed January 12, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> James Collins. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap--and Others Don't*. (New York, NY: Harper Business, 2001), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Beerman. "Increasing Army Retention through Incentives". (Research Project, U.S. Army War College, 2006), <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA448815>.

<sup>11</sup> National Priorities Project. "Military Recruitment 2008: Significant Gap in Army's Quality and Quantity Goals." National Priorities Project, January 21, 2009. <http://nationalpriorities.org/en/publications/2009/military-recruitment-2008-significant-gap-in-armys/>. (accessed January 12, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), *DOD Announces Recruiting and Retention Numbers for Fiscal Year 2012*. December 19, 2011. <http://www.defense.gov/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=14973>. (accessed January 12, 2012).

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining Global Leadership, Priorities of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Defense, January, 2012.  
[www.defense.gov/news/Defense\\_Strategic\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf). (accessed January, 12, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Christine Marsh, Leonard J. Samborowski, and Jodi S. Tymeson. “*Seamless Total Army Recruiting: A Concept for Army After Next*”. (National Security Program Discussion Paper, U.S. Army War College, 1999), 7. [www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA367562](http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA367562).

<sup>15</sup> Collins, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Collins, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Catlette, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Catlette, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Collins, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Collins, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Lloyd. *Special Forces: The Changing Face of Warfare*. (London: Arms and Armour, 1995), 14.

<sup>22</sup> Headquarters United State Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command History*. (MacDill AFB, Florida: Headquarters United State Special Operations Command, March 31, 2008), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Headquarters Department of the Army, *Army Special Operations Forces Unconventional Warfare, FM 3-05*. (Washington DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, September 30, 2008), 1-11.

<sup>24</sup> William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare : Theory and Practice*. (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1995), 390.

<sup>25</sup> Headquarters United State Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command History*. (MacDill AFB, Florida: Headquarters United State Special Operations Command, March 31, 2008), 29.

<sup>26</sup> Headquarters Department of the Army, *Unit Status Reporting*, AR220-1. (Washington DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, June 10, 2003), 27.

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<sup>27</sup> Peter A Buxbaum,. " From Brain Drain to Internal Bleeding: Retention Problems in the US Military." International Relations and Security Network, 10 May 2011.  
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<sup>28</sup> United States General Accounting Office. *DOD Needs to Better Understand Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems*. Testimony before the Subcommittee on Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, (GAO/T-NSAID-98-109). Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office, 1998. <http://www.gao.gov/archive/1998/ns98109t.pdf> (accessed January 04, 2012).

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